

Report of the Seventh Meeting of the U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Commission

October 22-23, 2015

Sochi, Russia

The seventh meeting of the U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Commission (hereafter, "Commission") took place **October 22-23, 2015** in Sochi (Krasnodarski Krai), Russia. The Commission meeting was attended by all four members of the Commission (**Amirkhan Amirkhanov, Sergei Kavry, Geoffrey Haskett and Jack Omelak**) and their respective delegates (Appendix 1). The Commission is responsible for implementation of the *Agreement between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Russian Federation on the Conservation and Management of the Alaska-Chukotka Polar Bear Population* (hereafter, "Agreement").

Thursday, October 22, 2015

Commissioner Amirkhan Amirkhanov opened the meeting welcoming the Russian and American participants, reaffirmed the importance of this meeting and its interrelation with the work of the Bilateral U.S.-Russia Presidential Commission, as well as with the work of the polar bear range states. He noted that the present meeting is taking place shortly after the range states meeting in Ilulissat (Greenland) where the Circumpolar Action Plan was adopted. There are serious tasks ahead of us, which have to be addressed before the repeal of the moratorium on polar bear harvest.

Commissioner Geoffrey Haskett stated that given the challenges that polar bears will face over the coming years it is important that we work together across the full range of the species, work collaboratively on shared populations and take responsible and effective actions within our own jurisdictions for the conservation of the species and its habitat. He noted that over the past year the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had been working with the Alaska Nanuuq Commission to lay the foundation for effective implementation of the annual taking limit through regulation. These efforts included meeting with Tribal Governments and local hunters to develop an effective and efficient implementation program, including more timely reporting procedures. Commissioner Haskett stated that he was committed to continuing and enhancing these efforts over the coming months in recognition of the critical role of local engagement in effective implementation. He said he looked forward to hearing updates from the Russian Federation on their progress towards implementing a legal subsistence harvest program.

Commissioner Jack Omelak stated that the Alaska Nanuuq Commission (ANC) has worked diligently over the past year to increase its organizational capacity to engage in cooperative management of the Alaskan subsistence harvest from the Chukchi Sea polar bear population. He noted that as a result of their community outreach he had received delegations of management authority from the majority of the communities the ANC represents and expects to receive similar support from the remaining communities in the near future. Commissioner Omelak said that he has learned of strong opposition to enforcing the current quota based on concerns over the lack of peer-reviewed science underlying the original

decision on harvest levels. He stated that he looks forward to working with his Russian and U.S. colleagues to achieve the goal of a sustainably managed harvest based on solid data that incorporate traditional knowledge and supports the continued cultural connections with polar bears through local civil co-management.

Presentation by A.A. Amirkhanov on fulfillment of responsibilities of Russia under the Agreement on conservation of Alaska-Chukotka polar bear population.

Previously the Alaska-Chukotka population was considered the most well-off and stable among the populations inhabiting Russian part of the Arctic. Though due to the impact of natural (climate change) and anthropogenic (industrial development in the Arctic and poaching) factors, according to scientists, the number of polar bears is likely to decrease. Currently the size of population is unknown and needs to be specified.

The main threats to Alaska-Chukotka polar bears and their habitat in Chukotka are related to the consequences of climate change and sea ice degradation, active industrial development in Chukotka and adjacent aquatic areas (oil and other mineral resources extraction, development of the North Sea Route, intensified shipping), and poaching. The lack of a tested system of response to oil spills in ice conditions gives rise to concern.

Considering the scale of contemporary development of Chukotka, control of compliance with rules and norms of rational nature management should be strengthened, for the purpose of guaranteeing the integrity and quality of polar bear habitat. These rules and norms should exclude or significantly diminish damage to the unique environment of the region and to polar bear habitat.

There are no precise data on the number of illegally taken polar bears; however, according to Russian experts, prior to 2010 the number in Chukotka was considerable, while after 2010 the frequency of poaching sharply decreased, possibly due to tightened legislation.

Measures taken for the purpose of conservation of polar bears in Chukotka include improvement of regulatory framework, territorial safeguard of polar bear habitat, including development of the system of protected areas of federal and regional significance, prevention of human-polar bear conflicts, raising of awareness and education for local communities, and scientific research and monitoring.

The Russian side deems it possible to consider the issue of use of Alaska-Chukotka polar bear population for subsistence needs, upon fulfillment of the following conditions: reduction of poaching to a minimal level, development of quota distribution procedures, a mechanism of control of harvest, development of a format of polar bear harvest reporting and criteria for verifying those reports.

Commissioner Amirkhanov noted that the management system and forward movement on implementation in the United States is a positive example, and exchanging information and experiences will facilitate forward progress by the Russian Federation and benefit indigenous people in both Regions.

Briefings by co-chairs of the Scientific Working Group (SWG) on SWG meeting outcomes – Stanislav Belikov, Eric Regehr

Dr. Belikov and Dr. Regehr provided a summary of research presentations and discussions

from the 6th annual meeting of the Scientific Working Group (SWG). The SWG reported completion of drafting of a joint study plan for the Alaska-Chukotka polar bear population, and a joint study plan specific to Wrangel Island. The SWG identified the importance of performing an updated assessment of the size and distribution of the Alaska-Chukotka population for the purpose of informing effective management. The SWG reported procedural decisions, including the intent to develop draft standards for information considered by the SWG, and a commitment to make appropriate SWG materials available on existing websites. The SWG made several recommendations to the Commission, including that the Commission consider potential risks to Alaska-Chukotka population associated with harvest management in Alaska in the absence of a collaborative approach that includes the support of hunters and communities (e.g., the risk of poor harvest reporting, increased bear mortality). The SWG also encouraged the Commission to support recurring joint workshops to promote standardized methods and coordination, particularly for genetic analyses and community-based monitoring.

In addition, the SWG made the following recommendations to the Commission:

- The SWG recognized that new biological information considered at this meeting did not suggest the need to change the current estimate of sustainable harvest level for polar bears from the Alaska-Chukotka population. Therefore, the SWG recommends no change to the current sustainable harvest level of up to 58 bears per year, of which no more than 1/3 will be female, or to the multiyear quota system as adopted by the Commission.
- The SWG recommended that Hilary Cooley (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) replace Todd Atwood (U.S. Geological Survey) as a member of the American section of the SWG, and that Andrew Von Duyke (North Slope Borough) be added as a member of the American section of the SWG to fill a vacant seat.

The Commission voted unanimously to adopt all recommendations in the Executive Summary from the SWG meeting, including the recommendation on sustainable harvest and proposed changes to the membership of the SWG.

Commissioner Haskett and Commissioner Amirkhanov emphasized that the Commission makes decisions based on advice and recommendations from the SWG

Agenda item: Presentation on the state of control of polar bear conservation in Chukotka region

Nadezhda Maksimova reported on the plan's implementation of priority measures for the conservation of polar bears in the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug for the period up to 2020 (approved on October 18, 2011, № 480-p), including interaction of environmental and law enforcement agencies for the conservation of polar bears, effective joint inspections for the prevention and elimination of poaching, involvement of residents in support of the measures and actions aimed at the conservation of polar bears, promotion of knowledge about the uniqueness of the polar bear, establishing and maintenance of the "Bear Patrol" -- a community-based assessment and inspection service. The Department of Agricultural Policy

and Management, together with the Office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation in the Chukotka Autonomous Region developed and implemented a plan of joint activities for the conservation of polar bears and other wildlife listed in the Red Data Book of the Russian Federation and of the Chukotka Autonomous Region.

Ms. Maksimova informed that the analysis of conflict situations associated with polar bears in the period 2010 – 2015 has indicated that the number of conflict situations and coercive shootings of polar bears is increasing as a result of receding sea ice in the Arctic seas.

Agenda item: Presentation on the status of polar bear conservation in Chukotka region. Possibility for indigenous peoples of Chukotka to use the polar bear harvest quota. Presentation of the Plan for Chukotka-Alaska polar bear population harvest management and control in Chukotka region.

Mkrtych Kazaryan informed that Department of Agriculture policy and management is involved in implementation in the Chukotka Autonomous Region of the U.S.-Russia Agreement on Conservation and Management of the Alaska-Chukotka Polar Bear Population. Federal state supervision in the field of conservation and use of fauna is carried out within the overall operational activities of the Federal state game supervision. In the period between January 1, 2014 and September 1, 2015 the Department conducted 84 joint raid actions in polar bear habitat. 362 persons and 109 buildings and vehicles were inspected. These environmental activities have not revealed any cases of illegal take of polar bears.

On August, 27, 2014 the Department of Agricultural Policy and Wildlife of the Chukotka Region and the regional non-profit partnership "Union of Marine Mammal Hunters" signed a joint plan of conservation and use of the Alaska-Chukotka polar bear population in the Chukotka Region.

The plan was developed in accordance with Paragraphs 1 and 2 of Article 10 of the Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the United States of America on the Conservation and Management of the Alaska-Chukotka Polar Bear Population.

Agenda item: Presentation on implementation of the sustainable harvest quota in the U.S., including anticipated time frames for enforcement of harvest quotas; report on harvest in the previous year.

Mary Colligan presented an update from the U.S. on harvest over the past year and activities within the U.S. in support of implementation of the Bilateral Agreement. In 2014, 17 bears were harvested, including two females, inside the Treaty Area. Since last year's meeting, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Alaska Nanuuq Commission (ANC) have visited villages to provide information on the Agreement, commitments to implement the annual taking limit through regulation, and to seek input into effective reporting and monitoring procedures. We have also worked with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the ANC on a formal review of our existing Marking, Tagging and Reporting Program so that lessons learned can help inform the path forward. Recommendations from that recent

review include convening a working group with partners to develop a strategic outreach plan, increased presence of management agencies in villages during peak harvest, improved communication and education, providing incentives for timely reporting, and collecting genetic samples for sex identification of bears. Next steps for implementation include convening working groups to develop an outreach plan and to develop options for local civil enforcement, conducting village visits, obtaining authorization for the ANC to adopt ordinances or regulations in the best interests of the members of the remaining villages represented by the ANC governing the hunting or taking of polar bears, and finalizing regulations.

Agenda item: Presentation on scientific research results in Chukotka in the past two years.

Stanislav Belikov informed that in 2014-2015 the organization “Arctic Research Center” initiated scientific research on polar bears over a wide area stretching from the Novaya Zemlya Archipelago to Wrangel Island. Research was carried out by the staff of the Russian public organization “Marine Mammal Council,” the All-Russian Scientific Research Institute of Environmental Protection (VNII “Ecology”), as well as the staff of Wrangel Island State Nature Reserve. During field work aerial observations of polar bears were conducted, including the use of contemporary equipment, temporary capture of polar bears to obtain biological samples, and deployment of telemetry tags, including satellite radio-tags, and to the extent possible non-invasive collection of material. Automatic remote cameras were installed on Wrangel Island to study the characteristics of polar bears spending time on the island, pregnant females entering dens and the emergence from those dens of polar bear families in the spring.

Agenda item: Report on 2014 field observations in the U.S. on the Alaska-Chukotka polar bear population and review of new information.

Dr. Ryan Wilson provided a summary of U.S. research on the Alaska-Chukotka polar bear population. The U.S. conducted polar bear captures in the Chukchi Sea in spring 2015, capturing a total of 61 polar bears, of which 11 had been previously captured. They applied 14 GPS collars, 15 satellite ear tags, and 16 geolocators. Polar bear body condition was similar to previous years, but they did note fewer ringed seals and more bearded seals. The presentation included an overview of recent research findings changes in polar bear land use and habitat conditions between 1986-1994 and 2008-2013. There has been an increase in the proportion of bears summering on shore for polar bears in the Alaska-Chukotka population and those that summer on land are spending 30 more days on land. Additionally, polar bear habitat selection patterns have not varied between the two time periods, but the amount of high-value habitat has dropped significantly in the summer compared to earlier periods. The Commission was also briefed on the development of a polar bear demographic model to inform conservation planning and how it can be used to inform management of human-caused removals. Descriptions of the following ongoing research efforts were also presented to the Commissioners; 1) Oil spill modeling in the Chukchi Sea, 2) Development

of remote sensing methods to estimate the number of polar bears on Wrangel Island, 3) IUCN Red List Assessment for polar bears, 4) Improved design and analysis of polar bear population studies, 5) Abundance estimation from aerial surveys in the Chukchi Sea, 6) Baseline study of ice seal ecology, 6) Hair-snare sampling from Barrow to Cape Lisburne to inform polar bear population studies in the Chukchi Sea.

Agenda item: Presentation of results of polar bear research of the A.N. Severtsov Institute of Ecology and Evolution (Russian Academy of Science)

Ilya Mordvintsev informed about a significant gap in scientific knowledge on the distribution of polar bears in Chukotka and their numbers, particularly in the face of climate change. The Severtsov Institute of Ecology and Evolution of the Russian Academy of Sciences, in the framework of the study of polar bears in the Russian Arctic, continue comprehensive research on the status of the Alaska-Chukotka population, with the support of the Government of Chukotka and in accordance with a bilateral agreement on scientific and technical cooperation between the Institute and the Department of Agricultural Policy and Nature Use of the Chukotka region of February 26, 2014.

Broad involvement of the indigenous peoples of Chukotka in monitoring activities is one of the aspects of the program.

Agenda item: Presentation on the U.S. Conservation Management Plan for polar bears

Dr. Eric Regehr presented an update on the U.S. draft Conservation and Management Plan. The U.S. released a draft report for public comment. They are currently analyzing comments and hope to release a final report in 2016. The Plan serves as a recovery plan, required by the Endangered Species Act; as well as a Conservation Plan, under the Marine Mammal Protection Act. The Plan was developed by a group of stakeholders that included representatives from many agencies and organizations. The plan serves as a means to communicate the need to reduce global greenhouse gas emission. It will also serve as a guiding document for sustainable co-management of subsistence harvest in the U.S.

Agenda item: Presentation on the Range States Outcome

Dr. Hilary Cooley presented on the recent Range States meeting that occurred in Greenland this past September. The Range States adopted a 10-year Circumpolar Action Plan (CAP) that builds on international cooperation to conserve polar bears across their range. The vision of the CAP is to secure the long-term persistence of polar bears in the wild that represent the genetic, behavioral, and ecological diversity of the species. Seven key threats are identified in the CAP; of these human-induced climate change and the effects of such changes on habitat and prey is considered the primary threat and the need to address greenhouse gas emissions for the conservation of the polar bear. The other threats include: human-caused mortality; mineral and energy resource exploration and development; contaminants and pollution; shipping; tourism-related activities, and disease. A two-year Implementation Schedule identifies actions to be undertaken by the Range States, and focus on adaptive

management, best management practices, monitoring and research, communications, and performance measurements.

Agenda item: Alaska Nanuuq Commission accomplishments supporting development of a local civil co-management regime for Chukchi Sea polar bears similar to the domestic management regime in place for bowhead whales

Commissioner Jack Omelak stated that the ANC has been working diligently to fulfill obligations of implementing a management plan for the quota. He stated this was necessary as there was no management structure in place to allocate the quota when it was proposed and passed in 2010. As a result, the ANC has and will continue to take significant education and outreach efforts, with the members and residents within the fifteen tribal entities and villages the ANC represents. Commissioner Omelak reported that six of the villages the ANC represents have passed tribal resolutions authorizing the ANC to implement a management plan for the quota based on a local and civil co-management regime similar to the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission model. He said that the ANC would work with partners to seek additional resolutions from the remaining villages over the next year. Commissioner Omelak concluded by saying that the ANC is committed to continue to work with federal partners, and those this management regime will affect, to implement a management plan that is founded and informed through local based civil co-management

Agenda item: discussion on quota implementation, including multi-year quotas

Agenda item: Indigenous people's involvement in research and conservation of polar bears in Chukotka region. Prevention of conflict situations. Work of the "Umka" Bear Patrol. Polar bear in the culture of indigenous peoples

Sergey Kavry informed that the "Umka" Bear Patrol applies efforts to prevent human-polar bear conflicts. A set of recommendations on preparedness for polar bear migrations has been worked out for municipal organizations, including the following:

1. Cleaning and removal to a safe distance of marine animals washed up on shore
2. Demolishing of old construction and conservation of wrecked houses
3. Blocking of doors and windows.
4. Additional lights in places of polar bear appearance: edge of the village, kindergartens and schools, clubs, shops, bakeries, etc ..
5. Awareness raising in villages.


The methodology has been developed for actions and behavior in case of unexpected encounters with polar bears. Informing about behavior for adults and children. Lessons on safe movement in settlements after dark during active migration of polar bears. In cooperation with local officers, meetings with staff of kindergartens and schools are organized in order to raise awareness about occupational safety. Informing implies personal responsibility for the health and lives of close relatives.

Agenda item: Statements by Observers: in Appendix 2

Agenda Item: Organizational Items

The next (8th) meeting of the U.S.-Russia Polar Bear Commission will be in 2016 in the Alaska (U.S.). The exact dates will be determined by mutual agreement.

Commissioners from the Russian Federation

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Amirkhan Amirkhanov

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Sergey Kavry

Commissioners from the United States

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Geoffrey Haskett

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Jack Omelak

Date: October 23, 2015